CREATING FREEDOM IN THE AMERICAS: 1776-1826
Panel III. Comparing Independence Movements in the Americas

4. The Haitian Revolution in Comparative Perspective

Of all the Atlantic revolutions, the fifteen-year struggle that transformed French Saint Domingue into independent Haiti produced the greatest degree of social and economic change, and most fully embodied the contemporary pursuit of freedom, equality, and independence. Between 1789 and 1804, the Haitian Revolution unfolded as a succession of major precedents: the winning of colonial representation in a metropolitan assembly, the ending of racial discrimination, the first abolition of slavery in an important slave society, and the creation of Latin America's first independent state. Beginning as a home-rule movement among wealthy white colonists, it rapidly drew in militant free people of color who demanded political rights and then set off the largest slave uprising in the history of the Americas. Sandwiched between the colonial revolutions of North and South America, and complexly intertwined with the coterminous revolution in France, Haiti's revolution was achieved with an exceptional degree of violence. Its unusually radical break with the colonial past was symbolized in the replacement of the European name Saint-Domingue with an Amerindian term from the pre-Columbian era.

The Haitian Revolution, like the French, was several revolutions in one. Because the whites, free coloreds, and slaves each pursued their own separate struggles, the revolution had a social and political complexity not found in the mainland independence movements. Whereas in France a briefly successful aristocratic revolt against the monarchy opened the way for a bourgeois revolution propelled forward by peasant and popular insurrections, in Saint Domingue the actions and mutual apprehensions of whites, free coloreds, and slaves stimulated and impeded by turns their respective pursuits of

autonomy, equality, and emancipation. And just as events in Saint Domingue shaped the simultaneous revolution in France, the Haitian Revolution evolved from beginning to end in constant interplay with the metropolitan revolution.

Although modest in its geographic and demographic dimensions, the Haitian Revolution might be considered the most transformative of the Atlantic revolutions, partly because of its relative cost and partly because of its multiple achievements: national independence, racial equality, and the outright abolition of slavery.

Slavery was a favorite metaphor for revolutionaries everywhere, but it became the central political issue of the Haitian Revolution. By 1794, the revolution had directly freed about one-sixth of the enslaved population of the Americas and, because of its indirect repercussions on Guadeloupe and Guyane, it freed in total one in five American slaves.[1] The American Revolution had undermined slavery in diverse ways but, in comparison, it had a very limited impact on the institution, and none at all on race relations. The Spanish American revolutions had a more substantial influence in both areas. Yet, as they established a technical racial equality almost at their outset, they gave rise to relatively little racial conflict, and their contribution to eradicating slavery amounted to little more than a belated concession of gradual emancipation that was in large measure a response to Haitian pressure.[2]

The price of success in the struggle for freedom, equality, and independence was, in relative and often absolute terms, far greater in the Haitian Revolution than in any of its counterparts. Newly independent Haiti exported about a quarter as much as prerevolutionary Saint Domingue. To judge from the Haitian census of 1805, the colonial population fell by one-third during the revolution, a decrease of 180,000 people,

far more than even Venezuela lost in twelve years of violent revolution. Some contemporaries thought the population had already declined that much by 1798. The number of refugees is hard to estimate, as many exiles returned home and fled again, but as a proportion of the total population their numbers were approximately twice as high as those of the American Loyalists and almost ten times as high as those of the émigrés from revolutionary France. The value of the property they abandoned—according to the French government, 272 million dollars—was much higher than for any other group of exiles. The three colonial powers, in attempting to suppress the revolution, lost close to 70,000 European soldiers and many thousands of seamen.[3] It is nonetheless somewhat bogus to depict the revolution as a transformation of the Americas' "wealthiest" colony into its poorest state: the standard of living of most of its inhabitants almost certainly improved, as the rapid growth of the ex-slave population suggests.

In view of its claims to international prominence, it is striking that the Haitian Revolution was largely ignored in the seminal texts of the Atlantic turn, R. R. Palmer's *Age of the Democratic Revolution* and Jacques Godechot's *France and the Atlantic Revolution of the Eighteenth Century*. Whether an oversight or a calculated exclusion, this raises the question of the conceptual unity of these revolutions "of the West," as the French and the American scholar called them. How much did they have in common? The issue of causation offers probably the least fruitful line of approach. Palmer and Godechot themselves disagreed: the former stressing ideas and politics; the latter, demography and economics. The collapse of state power, essential to launching the French, Haitian, and Spanish American revolutions, was absent in the case of the American Revolution. A cycle of war, fiscal reform, institutional protest, and popular

resistance was visible everywhere between the 1760s and 80s but only in France and the 13 colonies did it lead to revolution.

Godechot and Palmer probably felt that Haiti's revolution would be out of place in their grand narrative of liberal, republican democracy. Although the struggles of Saint Domingue's white colonists and free people of color might easily be incorporated into their revolutionary paradigm, the black revolution whose origins lay in the slave uprising of 1791 and which produced Haiti's first heads of state fits less well because of its authoritarian and later "ethno-national" character.[4] Such a judgement is at odds with some modern scholarship that presents the slave revolution as a pursuit of "democratic ideals" and "republican rights" and claims for it an important role in the creation of modern democracy.[5] Its rhetoric, however, was overwhelmingly counter-revolutionary and never republican. Insurgent slaves used *citoyens* as a smearword to describe their opponents. The French republic never really followed through in its extension of citizenship to ex-slaves, and the few elections held in Saint Domingue in the 1790s, to name deputies to the French legislature, were very localized and, according to critics, hardly free and fair.[6]

Toussaint Louverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and Henry Christophe, the main leaders who rose from slavery, were unashamedly dictatorial in their politics, as each of their constitutions makes clear. The country's unique declaration of independence justified secession as an act necessary to prevent the restoration of slavery but otherwise made no mention of rights. The État d'Haïti founded in 1804 was not a republic, although historians of all persuasions remarkably persist in calling it one. Dessalines arrogated all power to himself and took the titles "governor-general," and then

"emperor." When his *anciens libres* opponents (that is free-born non-whites) assassinated him in 1806 and drew up a republican constitution, Henry Christophe created a secessionist northern state that soon became a monarchy.

The Latin American revolutions also produced a few monarchs, and the French Revolution similarly ended in military dictatorship, but Haiti was unique in its blending of race and nationalism. Contrasting the complexions of the Haitians and French, and stressing the latter's cruelty and vulnerability to tropical disease, the declaration of independence vowed "eternal hatred of France" and called for vengeance against those French who remained in the country. Most were massacred in the following months. Dessalines's constitution forbade landowning by "whites" and mandated that all Haitians be designated "blacks." Notwithstanding Simón Bolívar's *guerra a muerte* against metropolitan Spanish "monsters," and padre Hidalgo's targeting of *gachupines*, the nationalism of the Americas' white revolutionaries expressed relatively little animosity toward the colonial rulers they much resembled, but Haitian nationalism, forged in enslavement and an exceptionally vicious war, was defined by race and born in bitterness.

Haiti's revolution also differed from the other colonial revolutions in that independence was not its central goal. Whereas a declaration of independence was made early in most of the mainland revolutions, in the Haitian Revolution it was the final act. In Saint Domingue, most white and free colored activists wanted self-rule rather than independence. The wealthiest planters tended to live in France, and those in the Caribbean were greatly outnumbered by slaves; they could not contemplate secession in the same way as their Virginian or Venezuelan counterparts. The age-old tensions caused

by metropolitan control of trade never reached flashpoint during the revolution, because the colonists in France decided to bury the issue so as to build a proslavery alliance with French merchants, while those in the colony were able to ignore mercantilist restrictions as government authority declined.[7] When they did seek to throw off French rule in 1791-94, it was primarily to maintain slavery and white supremacy, and they sought, not independence but a British protectorate.

The place of independence among the goals of Saint Domingue's slaves is unclear. One of the earliest documents to issue from the 1791 uprising summoned the French to pick up their jewelry and leave the colony to the slaves, whose sweat and blood had earned them title to the land. Common sense also suggests that the slaves would not have rebelled unless they expected to live afterwards free from the possibility of French revenge.[8] Such expectations, however, seem to have been quickly scaled back and, as noted above, the leadership of the insurrection generally displayed a rather limited commitment to the idea of general emancipation, let alone independence. Once the French Republic abolished slavery in 1794, most former slaves found their interests best served by remaining subjects of the French state, while most of the slave insurgents had already opted for a career as mercenary troops of the King of Spain.

Certainly, the polity that Toussaint Louverture ruled by 1800 was a colony only in name; some contemporaries thought he would declare Saint Domingue independent, and some Haitian historians have argued this was only a matter of time. Yet Toussaint never took that step, even when Bonaparte sent an army to overthrow him. It was Bonaparte's attempt to restore slavery and racial discrimination that finally led to independence.

The winning of independence benefited somewhat from British naval support in 1803--just as the U.S. navy helped Toussaint defeat his rival Rigaud in 1800--but foreign military intervention in the Haitian Revolution was for the most part hostile, at least in intent. Spain's intervention may have revived the slave insurgency and indirectly led to emancipation, but like Britain's intervention, it was intended to restore the status quo. The Haitian Revolution differed in this respect from the mainland colonial revolutions and resembled the French Revolution, in which foreign invaders also unintentionally radicalized developments. Whereas the North Americans received crucial assistance from the French state, as did Spanish Americans from the Haitian government and various foreign sympathizers, Haiti's revolutionaries, like those in France, triumphed largely in spite of the outside world.

Foreign powers similarly took far longer to recognize Haiti's independence than that of the mainland colonies. None did so until 1825, when France imposed a large indemnity as reparations for its colonists. The United States and the Vatican withheld recognition until the 1860s. The country was never isolated, as sometimes claimed, but the U.S. imposed a trade embargo between 1806 and 1810, and Haitian ships were excluded from British colonies until the 1840s.

Conclusion

For most Atlantic world insurgents, slavery was primarily a metaphor, but in Saint-Domingue it became the central issue in the revolution. The Haitian Revolution was not just a revolt against colonial rulers, still less a conflict among people of a shared culture and identity, but a war against slaveowners who had claimed most of the colonized as their own property. This basic fact imparted an extra degree of bitterness to

the fifteen-year struggle and shaped its priorities. Freedom came to be defined in the profound but limited sense of freedom from slavery rather than citizenship or independence. The revolution was unusual in the way it developed an authoritarian and ethno-national character, and in the extremely high price that was paid for its multiple achievements.

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[1] Around 1790 nearly 1 in 4 American slaves lived in a French colony, but the emancipation decree of February 1794 was not implemented in all of them.

[2] Paul Verna, *Petión y Bolívar: Cuarenta años de relaciones haitiano-venezolanas* (Caracas: np, 1969) 87-298; Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery* (London: Verso, 1988), 348.

[3] Figures from Drouin de Bercy, *De Saint-Domingue* (Paris, 1814), appendix; James Leyburn, *The Haitian People* (New Haven, 1966), 33, 320**;** Service Historique de la Défense, Vincennes, Armée de Terre, MS 592, 2:15; John Lynch, *The Spanish American Revolutions, 1808-1826* (London, 1973), 221; Palmer, *Age of the Democratic Revolution*, 1:188; Jacques Godechot, *France and the Atlantic Revolution of the Eighteenth Century, 1770-1799* (London, 1965), 60; *État détaillé des liquidations opérées par la commission...de l'indemnité de Saint-Domingue*, 6 vols. (Paris, 1828-33); Geggus, "Slavery, War, and Revolution in the Greater Caribbean," in Gaspar & Geggus, *A Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean* (Bloomington, 1997), 24-25.

[4] D. Geggus, "The Caribbean in the Age of Revolution," in *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c. 1760-1840*, ed. David Armitage, Sanjay Subramanyam (New York:

Palgrave, 2010), 244 n51; Leslie Manigat, *Évolution et révolutions* (Port-au-Prince, 2007), 88, 96.

[5] Laurent Dubois, "An Enslaved Enlightenment: Rethinking the Intellectual History of the French Atlantic," *Social History* 31 (2006): 11-12; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World* (Cambridge, 2004), 3; Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens*, 2-7.

[6] *Histoire des désastres* (Paris, 1795), 363-364; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 205.

[7] Debien, *Les colons de Saint-Domingue* (Paris, 1953), 53.

[8] Geggus, "Print Culture and the Haitian Revolution: the Written and the Spoken Word," in *Liberty, Égalité, Independencia: Print Culture and Enlightenment in the American, French, Haitian, and Spanish American Revolutions* (Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 2007}, 88-92; Yves Benot, "The Insurgents of 1791, Their Leaders and the Concept of Independence," in *The World of the Haitian Revolution*, ed. Geggus and Fiering, 153-171.